

Editorial: Supreme Court fines Legislature over education funding; will it work?

By: Capitol Hill Times Staff
August 19, 2015

The state Supreme Court is having a showdown with the Washington Legislature, giving lawmakers and the governor 100,000 daily reasons to look at increasing funding for public education. While Gov. Jay Inslee plans on gathering the troops this week to resolve this dispute, it's unclear whether the Legislature will accomplish more than it could during the recent 176-day session.

One could argue the Legislature gave education funding a good try this session, investing in all-day kindergarten and K-3 class-size reduction.

What remains at issue is adequate pay for teachers, which is something state and local teachers unions have been telling their legislators for years.

Washington Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn also came out in support of the Supreme Court order and convening another special session, which the court encouraged Inslee to do in its 11-page order.

The \$100,000-a-day fine imposed by the Supreme Court against the Legislature is meant to go into a special account for education and amount to about \$14 million by the time the next scheduled legislative session convenes in January, but it won't come close to satisfying the state's debt to education through the McCleary decision.

So far, it appears the best idea floated by lawmakers in Olympia has been a levy swap, proposed by House Appropriations Committee Chairman Ross Hunter as a way of easing the burden on school districts in less affluent communities that have to supplement teacher pay through local levies, not all of which gain strong support from voters.

That would likely mean richer districts would pay more into the state, so that it could inject that funding into poorer districts.

This is the type of conversation that gets heated really fast, especially when legislators know they'll soon be answering to their constituents come election season.

Hunter released a statement following the Supreme Court's action about how the House Democrats came up with HB 2239 to resolve the "personnel cost issue," and it even passed. Then the Senate Republicans blocked it, he reports.

The state constitution says education is “paramount,” and the lawmakers who resolved to put that word in there were right.

If educators are routinely complacent about their salaries, it seems odd lawmakers from both sides of the aisle can’t stow the politics and find a solution. These are the people entrusted to make sure Washington’s public students are prepared to live productive lives.

Because it costs more money — tax dollars most likely — many lawmakers will try to find patchwork solutions to public education for as long as they can.

It may be a long-term investment, but it would be nice to know that today’s children would grow up and have the opportunity to do important things, like maybe becoming senators and representatives.

And, with the right education, they might be able play nice and better this country for all of us.